

Ara's story

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1 - Alone

The beginning part one

The wind was blowing the storm clouds forward. With a little imagination you could see the thunder god riding in its wake, waiting for the hell that the clouds promised to break loose. That kind of storm often brings ill news. But when it blew over the village Gaihn they already had troubles. Gaihn was no large place, no more than thirty-five houses whereof just three had two floors. All but three people that lived in Gaihn were farmers. The first and maybe foremost of these persons was the mayor and tradesman Hardin. The other two was the tavern owner and the doctor. Just as the tavern lay in the middle of everything the doctor lived just outside the village.

Â You may have thought that the doctor would have been a beloved man but in Gaihn he was at the most tolerated. The only time people talked to him was when they were sick. But this day it was the doctor that was in the sickbed and for the first time since he had first come there everyone's thoughts were focused on him. No one except maybe the doctor's daughter knew anything about the healing arts and she didn't know nearly enough.

Â The daughter Ara sat at her father's bed and exchanged cold compresses on his all too warm forehead. The doctor had now been in his bed for a week. The fever ravings had kept Ara awake most of the nights and days. Now her father was finally sleeping quietly if not soundly and she felt herself nodding off. With an effort she forced her feet under her and got up. A fire was burning in the one of the two other rooms that were kitchen and living room as well as her quarters. Ara put two logs on the fire and hung a kettle with water over it. After that she put on her wool stockings, boots and two thick sweaters. As soon as she opened the door and the wind hit her Ara wished that she had taken one more sweater. But she didn't know if she had either the strength of body nor of mind to go out in the cold again if she went in to get one, so she kept going. The wind was wailing around the corners of the little house. She fought against it to get to the only two windows they had. Ara locked the first one without any problems. That was the window outside her father's room.Â The other window was outside the living room and that was harder because it closed against the wind. She got the shutters closed but had to let go with one hand to get the hatch to hold it there. Suddenly that wind came on harder than before and Ara lost her grip on the shutter. It crashed into the wall and broke. One board split and it was left hanging on one of its former two hinges. She looked at the broken, red painted wood and her eyes filled with tears. No one would be able to fix this now and probably never. When her father was gone no one except her would even want to try. And a nine-year-old girl wouldn't be able to do much. The wind bore away her tears before they even started running down her cheeks but she wiped her eyes anyway. Even though Ara went back in after that she had lost her feeling in ears, toes and nose before the door closed out the wind again. When she had gotten that all outdoor clothes, except the stockings, of her the water was boiling. As she fixed the tea in a brown teapot the warmth seeped in through her body. But even as she poured the tea into two cups and begun to carry them towards her father's bedroom her hands started shaking so bad that Ara had to put the cups down again. She tried again with the same result and got mad at herself. The tears started running again even though she tried to fight them there just came more. Ara sank down on the floor with her back against the wall. Now her whole body was shacking badly. She put her arms around her knees as if she could hold them still and thus stop the crying fit that now was coming on.

Â Ara didn't know how long she sat there; she actually didn't give the time a thought until the cold made her look up again. The fire was burning low and even through the window closed as well as it could but the wind was seeping in through the joints. It had never been built to keep closed in this kind of storms without the hatches.

Â As Ara got up on her feet she the tears was still running down her cheeks and she was still shacking. But now she ignored the tears and the shacking was subsiding as she relaxed. She walked up to the fireplace and put the pot beside it for the tea had gone cold. Ara put more logs on the fire and then snuggled up as close she could without burning. She felt how her whole body relaxed completely and that was where she fell asleep.

Â It was in the small hours she woke up; the fire was now burning low again but she had edged closer to it so she was still comfortable warm. The warmth made Ara sort of sluggish in her movement but it had been her hunger that had woken her and now it also forced her to act. She put a cauldron with stew that she had made the day before over the fire. As she put more wood on it she made a quiet prayer to whatever god that was listening, hoping that it would catch fire. She also prayed that her father would be better when she opened the door. This prayer was more heartfelt on the same time as it was more unbelievable, even in Ara's own nine-year-old mind. She had after all grown up with a doctor and she had seen people die often enough to know that there wasn't much of a chance for her father.

Â She was now standing and looking at her father. He was lying just as before, then only things that showed that he was alive was how the breast slowly moved up and down and the faint blush on his cheeks from the fever. As a doctor's daughter Ara was used to death but still, dealing with her father's mortality was hard.

Â The fire was burning low her too but the room was still hot since no warmth could leak out the window. But it was almost pitch dark so she fired up in the hearth and lit two candles. As Ara sat down by her father's bed he first stirred and then spoke without even opening his eyes. "Ara is that you?" His once strong voice was no more than a whisper now and Ara had to lean forward to hear it.

"Yes daddy I am here," Ara tried to keep the tears that she felt coming on again away. She had never cried as much as she had the last week and wondered if you couldn't run out of tears.

"Where is Sarah? When is she coming?"

Now Ara felt the tears running but her father didn't seem to notice. Sara was her mother who now had been dead for four years. It had been the autumn Ara was turning five that she had slipped of the fallen leaves into the river. Even if the river hadn't been on it's strongest it had been such a cold year that there already was a thin layer of ice on it. Sarah hadn't even had a shot at surviving the freezing water. Ara's father had mourned her for a long time for they had loved each other dearly, but still, he was as much over her as he would ever be and had been for years. But for the last three days he had asked after her every time he had woken.

"She isn't coming daddy," after some seconds when no one spoke she continued talking, thinking that it must be said as it surly was true. "But you will come to her soon daddy, so don't be sad." It is a hard thing for a little girl to take care of her father in this way. "Lie to protect" sounds pretty nice, something a grownup does to a kid. Then you can say "Protect by laying", that doesn't sound as nice, but Ara didn't think that she was really doing either of those things right now. She was after all sure that her mother had gone to dine with the gods and that her father was going there too for they were both good and honest persons.

"When?" It was more a rasp than an actual word but Ara understood what he asked, he had after all asked the same questions many times by now.

"Soon daddy, just you wait for she is waiting for you," she answered as she also had many times now.

"Good, good. You are a good girl Ara, you know that don't you?"

"Yes daddy, daddy I don't want you to leave me!"

"I would never leave you honey, you know that, never."

There was a lie in his words but he didn't even know it and when he said it she could almost believe it. He had, after all, never lied to her.

Â He didn't say anything else so she got up and went into the living room. There the stew was warm enough so Ara put it in two bowls. She also picked up her blanket under her arm before she went in to her father again. She dumped the blanket on the floor and put her bowl close to the fire so it would stay warm longer. After that Ara sat down on the chair beside her father's bed. When she put her hand on his arm he moved and opened his eyes to look on her. She took a spoon and silently started to feed him. When he seemed to have had enough there was still much left in the bowl but Ara didn't push it, the food wouldn't do that much good anyway. There was a bucket with cold water under the bed and Ara tried to make him drink as much as possible from the ladle. It was water that was important as long as the fever didn't break, and then the food would come.

Â When Ara started to eat the doctor slipped back into sleep but it wasn't as peaceful as before. He seemed plagued with bad dreams. Dreams made so real with the fever that he sometimes screamed but Ara couldn't make out any words. All she could do was to put a cold compress on his forehead and then wrapped in her blanket she tried to sleep.

Â The fever didn't break during that night nor the next day. Ara sleep was almost as unruly as her father's had been and when she woke up sometime around midday she was still exhausted. The storm was still whining but maybe with a little but less ferocity than before. Ara shifted the sheets in her father's bed for they had been drenched in sweat during the night and the previous day. It was a hard thing to do for she was not even big for her age and he was a tall man. He helped a bit but not much for he seemed to have even less strength than her. When she was finished it wasn't perfect but by rolling him from one side to the other Ara had at least gotten the new sheets under him and taken away the old ones. After that she made some tea of the poppy that her father drank well enough. It would help him sleep soundly for some hours. For breakfast to herself Ara ate some more of the stew and tried to decide what to do with what was left of the day. She wanted to wash the sheets and some clothes but she didn't know how long the storm would last so she couldn't waste valuable wood by heating that much water. Even the water was too valuable for that matter, if she wanted that much water she would be forced to go and get it in the well. She could of course wash it in cold water but that still left the problem with drying it, there was no way she could hang anything outside today. No, there must be something else she could do. They were almost out of bread so Ara decided to set a dough. After that was done and the dough had to rise so she pulled out one of her father's big books with pictures of herbs and the like. She sat on the sofa that also was her usual bed as she read some in the book but mostly looked at the pictures. At every new herb she got to she tried to remember if she had seen it outside anytime. Most of the plants were strange but she recognized some.

Â There were of course the poppy that could make a man sleep and that grew all over the riverside. There was also the chamomile herb can calm jangled nerves, relieve stomach distress, prevent ulcers, speed their healing and help fight infection. Ara had thought of giving her father some chamomile tea but after looking in his medicine cabinet she had discovered that they were out of it and since it was still only early spring nothing was growing in the fields yet. She flipped through the book and the next thing she recognized was a flower that most called Chocolate flower but the book named it as Alumroot. It was a pinkish-purple flower that grows in the late spring. There was also a long text about how it could be used but Ara understood less than half of it:

To reduce inflammation of mucous membranes, curb irritation of haemorrhoidal tissue, and to restore venous health. Alum Root is an especially powerful astringent for passive bleeding, as occurs in hematuria, hemotysis and menorrhagia, and has a potent healing effect on the entire gastrointestinal

tract. It has been used in the treatment of ulcers in combination with Agrimony. Like Mullein, Alum Root has been found to be active against tuberculosis bacteria. Alum Root was also relied on to treat diarrhoea, dysentery, and leucorrhoea, among other conditions.

She absently wondered if her father had any of these diseases, if he had there was nothing she could do to help him.

^ The dough had risen now so Ara baked it out on a baking tin and then went back to the book, passing the time as she waited to put the bread onto the oven. She looked up Agrimony since the book had said that you could use that together with Alumroot. This was what the book had to say about Agrimony: Agrimony is also known as Church Steeple, Cocklebur, Loan Mao Cao, Philanthropies, Potter's Piletabs, Sticklewort, Stickwort, and Xian He Cao. Agrimony is a valuable herb and is mainly used as a gastro-intestinal tonic. It is also a useful remedy for coughs, skin eruptions and cystitis. Agrimony is a member of the rose family. It has been used to stop excessive menstrual flow, as an astringent, and a cardio tonic. Agrimony helps to clear heat and dry dampness and has been used for asthma, bronchitis, diarrhoea, incontinence, sore throat, and as a digestion aid. When used internally or externally, it increases the level of trombocytes, thus improving coagulation. Agrimony also has analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antiviral, and diuretic properties. The name Agrimony has its origins in the old word "argemon", meaning speck in the eye, as this herb was used as a wash for eye problems.^ The species name, eupatoria, refers to an ancient King. Agrimony also has been used as a yellow dye. Agrimony herb consists of the dried, aboveground parts of Agrimonia eupatoria, harvested shortly before or during flowering. The herb contains polysaccharides, tannins, flavonoids, coumarins, silica, malic acid, phytosterols, vitamins B and K, and iron. Should be taken with water at mealtimes. Maybe this was the herb that could save her father but it would be impossible to ever know for this plant Ara didn't even thing that she had seen. She also didn't know how much to give a person or how to give it, a tea was the usual way but she had seen her father even burn certain herbs so they could be inhaled. The wrong dosage or given the wrong way could as easily kill as save a person. That was something she had heard often enough during her upbringing.

^ She closed the book and put the bread into the little oven that her father had bought to her mother when they had married. Ara also put on water to make borage tea. Her father had taught her early that borage could break a fever and even if it hadn't helped her father yet Ara couldn't think on anything better. When the tea was ready she walked into her father. After looking on him a while she decided that he was sleeping better now than before and that the fever had gone down a bit. That made her a little happier as she gently shacked him. The short period he was awake took away her little happiness for he was very warm when she touched him and as he drank the tea he didn't even have the energy to speak. She helped him to sit up and as soon as she took away her arm and the cup he was back in his fever sleep. Ara didn't even think that he had been awake at all. She tucked both his and her own blanket around him before she left again.

^ When the bread was ready and had cooled down a bit Ara made herself some sandwiches with cheese and sausage on. To that she drank milk that her father had bought from one of the farmers. The only sounds in the house were the wind's howling and the slams as the storm tried to rip off what was left of the window shutter away. These are scary sounds for a little girl that is all alone both in the house and in the world, with the only exception of her dying father. Ara was sitting all quiet and listening, she heard how the wood cracked and imagined that the house was going to fall down, it was then there was a knock on the door. She leaped by surprise and wondered who had defied the storm to come out here. "Please come in!" she yelled and waited. The door was opened almost instantly.

^ In stepped her aunt with her husband, Jeff Farmer. Ara didn't have anything against Jeff, or Uncle Jeff as she was told to say. He was one of those people that tucked her a sweet or a copper when no one

else saw. Her aunt on the other hand had been one of those who had acted the worst against Ara and her father since her mother had died. It was as if her aunt blamed her father for Sarah's death, and the fact that Ara's father was a foreigner, not even the same race with his darker skin and black hair, hadn't helped.

Â As soon as the aunt saw either Ara or the doctor her mouth tightened, just as it did now. Jeff closed the door as fast as he could and then took off his coat and hat. Ara hurried forward so that she stood in front of her aunt and curtsied. Her aunt gave her a dignified nod in return.

"Be blessed in this dark weather," Jeff said to her and that gave him a rather annoyed look from the aunt.

"Be blessed for coming here in this dark weather Uncle Jeff," Ara said for whatever her aunt thought about it the only polite thing Ara could do was to answer.

"You speak when spoken to, child," her aunt said and Ara had to bite herself in her lip to don't say that she had been spoken to. She had early on learned that to speak against grownups was insolent. Her next thought was if she was expected to answer with 'yes, Aunt' or just keep quiet. As it was her aunt continued to speak almost directly so Ara probably hadn't been expected to say anything. "Is he better or dead yet child?" The voice was so cold that you couldn't hear what she was hoping most for.

"No Aunt, he is the same as before Aunt." Ara felt so small when her aunt was staring down at her and when she heard herself she didn't think that she sounded any bigger than a mouse; her aunt's eyes also said that she was no more than a mouse, and a filthy mouse at that.

"Can't he do anything right, either get well or die and not taking up good people's time?" Now the aunt just sounded annoyed.

Ara wondered if that was a question that she was required to answer, she hoped not. As they had talked they had also moved and now they stood on the middle of the room.

"Well we didn't come to talk about the dying, we came to see if the Doctor was better for little Sam as caught a cold and we want something to help him get better."

"I... I might have something Aunt, would you wait, please?"

"I will wait but let it be quick girl."

Ara got some powdered slippery elm bark that she knew was good against colds and the like. She put it in a paper that she folded so it wouldn't fall out and rushed back to her aunt.

"It is for a tea Aunt. Two spoons per cup boiled and simmered 15 minutes. Up to 3 cups per day Aunt. It will help him." Ara gave the little paper to her aunt and held out her hand.

Her aunt stared on the still outstretched hand. "I won't pay a halfborn child for something that probably won't even work." She said with disdain.

"You will so Jenna 'cause you know that the girl knows what she is talking about," said Jeff with a tone that not even her aunt tried to defy. "How much would your father take girl?" He then said more kindly.

"One silver and two coppers Uncle Jeff," Ara whispered thinking that someone had defied her aunt for her.

"The child is lying, this is outrageous! You can't believe it Jeffery!" Her aunt was almost screaming at him but Jeff seemed oblivious to her.

He made a point of counting up all the coins in his hand before giving them to Ara; there was one silver but three coppers. Ara first thought that it was wrong but Jeff just smiled at her as she tried to give it back. Her aunt looked as if she was going to explode.

Â As they left and Jeff was closing the door he turned around "I hope he gets better" it was all he said and before Ara could come with anything to reply the door had closed.

hen Ara woke up the next day the storm had subsided to just as strong wind. As she got up from the floor in her father's bedchamber and put on more wood on the fire. She took out two new candles from a drawer in the bedside table and after she had lighted them she put one in the candlestick on the table and the other in the candlestick on the wall. Then she looked at her father to see if he was awake. He was very pale, even the blush that the fever had put on his cheeks was gone. Ara knew without touching him that he was dead but forced herself to put a hand on his cold cheek anyway. Even if she had seen dead people before she had never touched one and the coldness scared her. Ara quickly pulled way her hand and just to put it back again after a moments thought. This was her father; there was no reason to be scared of him. Even when she told herself this she couldn't keep from thinking that this wasn't her father at all. Her father had been a man that had thrown her into the air just to catch her on the way down. Her father had been a man to laugh, even a man to cry sometimes. That was her father, not this lifeless hump of meat. On the same time as she thought this she pulled away her hand again but this time it wasn't because she was scared. There was just no reason to keep it there anymore. Her father was gone. But still there came no tears and that was the answer on a question she had asked herself again and again the last week; you obviously could run out of tears.

Chapter 3

A

ra stood looking at the little hill of freshly packed earth were her father now was buried. The five men from village that had buried him were now moving away. No one had said a word as they where digging and now they where moving away in silence. That was all the burial and ceremony Ara's father got. A light rain was pouring down but it wasn't really cold and that meant that the spring was finally coming to Gaihn. Ara had been standing some meters away as the hole had been dug and as her father had been lowered into it.

Â Now as the men left she could hear them mutter things to each other under their breath. "...poor child, all alone in the world..."

"...without both father and mother, wonder how she will get along..."

"...no relatives that cares, that is a shame..."

Then it was the general agreement. "...but there is nothing we can do, already have enough people to feed..." After that they were out of hearing but Ara didn't really want to hear more anyway. She already knew that no one would take her in, she would have to take care of herself the best she could. The spring and the summer wouldn't be that hard. There was still left some of the food stored for the winter and they hadn't been poor. A little girl didn't either eat that much compared to a grown man. Ara could still help people with some of the easier deceases and thus get some money. Then counting what she could collect from nature the spring, summer and even autumn would go fine. The real problem would be the oncoming winter. Now, in the first spring heat, it seamed very far away. But if it now was far away from Ara it also was one of the things she never could control. It was unstoppable and every day brought he closer to it.

Â Ara didn't know how long she stood there in the rain as starred, at the place where her father now lay beside her mother, with her mind far, far away, on the winter. It was getting dark when she finally got a grip on herself and went inside. She lighted some candles and pulled of her wet clothes. She hung them over the back of one of the chairs. Ara then lights a fire that soon was burning merrily in the hearth. She put the chair in front of the flames, hoping that the clothes would be dry by the next day. As she pulled her nightshirt on she didn't feel hungry and after realizing that there was no one to tell her hat she needed to eat she went to bed. Ara hadn't slept in her own bed since her father's condition had gotten so

bad that he couldn't leave his bed without help. As she now lay in her bed it felt strange on the same time as Ara felt more at home than she had in a long time. But she still couldn't sleep directly. First it was too hot so she threw off her quilt, after a while she was too cold and had to draw up the bedcovering again.

Â When she finally fell asleep the quilt was drawn up to her chin but her feet were outside. Ara's night was strange and filled with bad dreams. In one of the dreams Ara was looking for something, something that she had to find. But something cold was chasing her. That dream ended with that everything went dark around her. She continued to run forward and suddenly the ground disappeared under her feet. Ara fell and right before she hit the ground she woke up in her bed. As she realised that she was in her own bed she was soon asleep again and in the morning she remembered neither this nor any other dream. The only thing that stayed with Ara in the morning was a strong feeling of being totally alone.

Â After having eaten and washed herself as good as she could, she didn't know what to do. There was no one to tell her and for the first time in her life she had to manage all by herself, even realise what had to be managed. After a moment of thinking she pulled on her boots and a thick sweater, took two buckets, and walked out. First she brought in water that she had in the big barrel in the kitchen. Then she took the axe and began to chop wood. Ara wasn't all that used to chop wood since this had been the first winter she had even been allowed to touch the axe. She was more used to sawing up the wood for her father to chop. Because of this it took some time to get the wood to a usable size but she was still ready long before midday with all the wood she could use. Then she took many rounds to carry as much as she could inside by the hearth. The rest she carried inside the little wood shed that was built together with the outhouse.

This was the beginning of seemingly endless and lonely weeks.